

# Bringing Us Back to Life: Storytelling and the Modern Organization



by Seth Weaver Kahan

*Seth Weaver Kahan, a performance artist and professional storyteller, is also a senior information officer at The World Bank. He can be reached at [skahan@worldbank.org](mailto:skahan@worldbank.org).*

## ••• What Does Storytelling Have To Do With Business?

WHEN I TELL PEOPLE THAT I USE STORYTELLING IN MY JOB, I USUALLY receive confused looks in return. 'It sounds novel and interesting,' they wonder aloud, 'but what does storytelling have to do with business?' Well, a great deal more than you might imagine.

*Storytelling is one of the oldest and most powerful devices for building community.*

For thousands of years, human beings have gathered in community to share their stories, to listen and learn about themselves, to what their lives are about, and how their common values are acted out in the world.

*Storytelling is a powerful tool to launch change.*

"Time after time, when faced with the task of persuading a group of managers or front-line staff in a large organization to get enthusiastic about a major change . . . storytelling was the only thing that worked," argues Stephen Denning, former program director, knowledge management at The World Bank and author of *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*.

*Storytelling is an effective way to share knowledge.*

According to Larry Prusak and Don Cohen, co-authors of *In Good Company, How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work*, "Storytelling is increasingly seen as an important tool for communicating explicit and especially tacit knowledge - not just information but know-how." [See *Information Outlook's* interview with Larry Prusak in this issue for more on storytelling.]

### Experimental Theater and Rites of Passage

I have been a performance artist since 1978, producing and performing experimental theater. Over the years I have produced many events in which audiences and performers worked and played together in creative and unusual ways. I see collaborative art as a form of social engagement.

Through this type of performance work I have developed an interest in rites of passage that empower individuals to make social contributions. These ceremonies can be a

social infrastructure which transforms the participant from a child, who is dependent on community, to an adult who can make unique and valued contributions. Some of these ceremonies can serve as valuable models for the world of business, and specifically for the field of knowledge management.

In my work as a senior information officer at The World Bank, I coordinate the professional and community development of the 900+ technology and information services staff. This community includes people in offices around the world who put satellites in the sky, PCs on the desktop, develop enterprise software, run and deliver our library systems, intranet, extranet, and so forth. Helping them interact with each other to promote effective collaboration is part of my job.

### A Story about Storytelling . . . in Business

Not so long ago, an inter-governmental group of chief information officers (CIOs) gathered to explore how organizations were building successful knowledge management (KM) initiatives in cultures in which information hoarding, competitiveness, and secrecy were the norm. This group invited me to share how my background and experience could help to build community in a business setting. But I wanted to do more than talk about it. I wanted the CIOs to *experience* this type of community building in the context of KM.

So, I drew on my experience in ritual to lift the context from daily work to the larger contribution that people and organizations are making. I then set the stage by telling my own story and inviting others to share their stories. This approach led to a blossoming of openness and collaboration that was remarkable. Let me give you a deeper sense of what it was like.

### Elevating the Context with Poetry

I begin by sharing my own story: how I made the journey from performance artist to senior information officer. I start with my story for two reasons. First, I have learned that *how* we share is equally important as *what* we share,

so I like to start with something I can do in a relaxed and comfortable way. Second, I model the same vulnerability that I later ask of the participants by sharing a personal perspective, yet without going overboard into “touchy-feely group therapy.”

I connect my interest in rites of passage with the social transformation of organizations. Our companies are bumbling along, trying to help staff move from a dependent, childlike relationship with the organization, to an adult connection through which shared leadership and more meaningful contributions are possible. The murmurs and nodding of heads in my audience tells me the CIOs can relate to this.

I then ask my audience to indulge me by listening to a poem that I often use in my performances. This poem is called the “Prayer of the Three Times.” [NOTE: One source of the prayer is *World as Lover, World as Self* by Joanna Macy.] I tell them that when I am finished reciting the poem, I will ask them to share something about what they experienced as listeners. They shift in their seats, noticeably uncomfortable. I have seen this before, of course, and I reassure them that participation is entirely voluntary. I let them know that any response is acceptable, including, ‘The poem did nothing for me,’ or ‘I didn’t like the poem.’ All I ask is that they listen to the poem and be prepared to share their experience.

With this introduction, I pick up a Tibetan prayer gong, a small bowl that makes a wonderful sound when struck, and I ask them to listen quietly. The poem is an improvisation, but here is a brief version of what I say:

**Gonggg . . .**

*If time was not an obstacle and we could invite all of our ancestors to be here, present with us, what would they tell us? If our grandparents . . . and their parents . . . could be here, what would they have to say about our work in the world?*

*And if the ancestors of other species could be here: eagles, elephants, snakes, and fish . . . the mountains that are now dust, the clouds that have become part of the sea, the rivers that are now dry . . . what messages would they have for us and how we live our lives?*

*Hear me, ancestors, you are not trapped by the narrow views we hold, by the constraints we place upon ourselves, and the politics of our workplace . . . What do you have to tell us here, today about what we have to offer the world?*

**Gonggg . . .**

*If time was not an obstacle and we could invite all of the children-yet-to-be-born here with us now, what would they tell us?*

*If we invited the children-yet-to-be-born of all species: the caribou and antelope, the coral snake, the currents not yet formed deep in oceans, the clouds not yet assembled, and the winds not yet blown . . . and our own children . . . and their children . . . and their children . . .*

*Hear me, children-yet-to-be-born, help us remember that the world we are building is the world you will inherit. Help us to create a world worthy of your spirit.*

**Gonggg . . .**

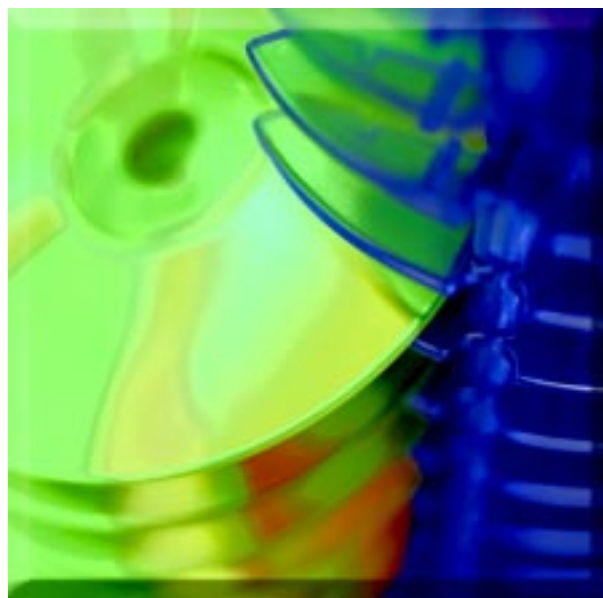
*If space was not an obstacle and we could invite all beings in the world to be here, present with us now, what could we do together?*

*If the bushes that line our streets, the clouds that fill our skies, the mountains on the horizon, the great seas and rivers, the ravens, the elephants, the mountain lions, and the salamanders, the strangers on the other side of the world, and our own children, partners, lovers, friends, and colleagues could all gather together . . . could we lean on each other, learn from each other, and move forward together? What could we . . . would we . . . do?*

**Gonggg . . .**

I am silent. The room is silent, too. It is one of those moments when an entire gathering becomes completely still, almost suspended in time. Everyone is together, all consciousness drawn into the moment . . . hovering . . . listening . . . being. It’s awe-inspiring.

I then reveal another unusual object: a Cherokee “talking stick.” It’s a ceremonial stick made for me by a Cherokee medicine woman. It’s visually stimulating, adorned with traditional symbols: fur and antlers, feathers and paint. Every nuance is rich with meaning. I explain a few of the



symbols as they have been explained to me. I tell the group that I am not going to be indoctrinating them into an alternative spirituality group, but that we are going to use the stick as a symbol. The stick will be our symbol of sharing truth; truth with a little “t,” not a big “T.” I am looking for individual truth, the kind that comes simply from speaking honestly. I explain that we pass the stick around and everyone has the opportunity to share. It’s also okay to pass, not saying anything. And, it’s okay to speak on an unrelated topic if that’s what you have to say. Finally, it’s okay to just hold the stick in silence.

## Storytelling in a community context holds the potential to revitalize the way we do business.

I offer the stick. There’s a pause. I have learned that silence is often necessary for thoughtful sharing. After a bit, someone takes the stick. It’s my turn to listen. What I hear blows me away.

### Personal Storytelling Builds Community

One CIO shares how the poem reminded her that she misses her parents. They died just three years before. She recalls how they each guided her in subtle and small ways, how she depended on them, and now that they’re gone, she’s on her own. She thought of them when I mentioned “ancestors” and she wondered what they would think of her work in KM and what they would tell her if they were still alive.

A gentleman from a large organization known for its secrecy and close relationship to the U.S. Department of Defense wonders aloud, ‘How will my organization’s goals contribute to the world in which my grandchildren will grow up?’ He tells of the culture of invulnerability and competitiveness within his group, and reflects on what these norms imply about core values. He ends by speculating on what contributions he can make as CIO to see his organization reach its *human* potential.

A consultant in the group shares some of her experiences conducting corporate interventions. She says this is one of the quickest techniques she has ever seen for engaging people in the deeper implications of their work lives. She connects the experience to ancient ceremonies in cultures the world over, and wonders what treasures we have lost in our rush to be civilized.

The storytelling unfolds in a quiet and relaxed pace as people take the time to let deep thoughts surface, and to listen to each other without interruption.

Soon it is time to close. There seems to be a consensus that we have only just begun to discover who is in the room, beyond the job titles, and what deeper issues concern us. It has become apparent that by calling the whole person forward to discuss business issues we get a far more thorough perspective. Our increased rapport helped us to draw on personal experiences that are not normally available as resources in the business world. After we break, people linger for a long time, discussing what happened and how they can apply it when they return to their organizations. People call me aside to tell me over and again,

“Important qualities of our community emerged with each sharing. We got to know each other in essential and relevant ways.”

### The Meaning of the Session

It’s important to let you know that this kind of experience doesn’t appeal to everyone. I’ve shared this poem literally hundreds of times in corporate settings. On one occasion, a person walked right out of the room when they heard what I was going to do. Some don’t respond positively. However, the value of this type of work is found in the participants’ authentic responses, whether or not they endorse the method. So even the statement made by walking out can reveal value, if it is followed up sensibly.

What happened here? Is it a contribution to the world of business? I think so. First of all, this type of community storytelling invites the whole person into the workplace conversation-tacit knowledge and all. Storytelling in a community context holds the potential to revitalize the way we do business.

Second, the end product of this type of interaction is people working better together. Communities are nurtured, and social capital-the trust, reputation and the shared values that contribute to a healthy culture- is increased and fortified. Work teams gain a deeper appreciation of members’ strengths and weaknesses. The authentic participation of staff creates a platform for a higher quality of work. Indeed, the ancient art form of storytelling can contribute to the world of business. It brings our human community back to its deeper purposes. Storytelling brings us back to life. 